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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 000537

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR WHA, DRL, AND CA  
NSC FOR SHANNON AND MADISON  
LABOR FOR ILAB  
TREASURY FOR OASIA-LAMONICA  
USDOC FOR 4322/ITA/MAC/WH/CARIBBEAN BASIN DIVISION  
USDOC FOR 3134/ITA/USFCS/RD/WH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/28/2006

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [ASEC](#) [DR](#)

SUBJECT: DOMINICAN WORK STOPPAGE, JAN 28-29: STREETS ARE  
DESERTED

REF: A. (A) SANTO DOMINGO 490

[1](#)B. (B) IIR 6 827 0045 04 (NOTAL)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Most businesses were shuttered and schools were closed for the January 28-29 national work stoppage in the Dominican Republic, called by a coalition of community, labor, student, and political groups to protest economic and social policies. Banks and supermarkets were open but neighborhood groceries ("colmados") were not. As of late afternoon, streets in Santo Domingo were generally calm with light traffic. There was virtually no public transport, other than an occasional bus operated by the government public transit company, usually with police riders aboard. The ports were receiving and unloading ships but there was no transport available to move containers out of port areas.

[1](#)2. (SBU) As in the November one-day strike, police carried out sweeps ahead of time to arrest likely troublemakers. Police were deployed throughout the country, with their presence heaviest in towns with a history of civil disturbances. The military were in the barracks, except for some heavily armed military patrols in at least three northern towns including Puerto Plata, two towns in the Southwest, and remote neighborhoods of the capital.

[1](#)3. (SBU) A senior police official told us three persons were arrested from January 27 to early January 28, by police accompanied by a prosecutor's office representative, and were immediately released. The official said about a dozen persons have been detained for burning trees or disturbing the peace.

[1](#)4. (C) President Mejia sent an advisor to the Embassy at mid-day on January 28 to assure the political officer that authorities had "absolute control" of the situation. Mejia addressed the nation yesterday evening to urge calm and to deplore the "3 billion pesos" in economic activity likely to be lost to the strike.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Some of our contacts are apprehensive about possible disturbances in the evening hours. Others consider that the strike is likely to continue without event or even to peter out tomorrow.

[1](#)6. (SBU) Military and intelligence contacts say that violent incidents have occurred in Salcedo and Navarrete in the north, and homemade bombs have detonated in several interior towns with minimal damage. Morning rotestors in two neighborhoods of Santo Domingo burned two cars, knocked down trees, and threw rocks. Burning tires were reported in a dozen locations in the capital. An industrial free zone at Las Americas International Airport near Santo Domingo closed during the day upon receiving reports that sharp objects were being strewn on the airport highway -- but in mid-afternoon Embassy personnel found the highway open and unobstructed, with no signs of protest.

[1](#)7. (SBU) Our sources comment that if serious disturbances occur, they are more likely to begin at nightfall. Security forces withdraw patrols from rough neighborhoods at night, although they will maintain perimeters.

[1](#)8. (SBU) Opposition political party contacts deny rumors that they are paying protesters to stir up trouble. Our contacts believe that anti-Mejia political leaders would not engage in such tactics, although neighborhood party members might. They recalled the brief demonstrations at Santo Domingo university UASD on the afternoon of January 23, during which masked youths burned a vehicle and police responded with tear gas volleys.

[1](#)9. (SBU) On January 27, the day before the formal strike, medical personnel at public hospitals shut down routine outpatient care, with demands for a doubling of salaries; GODR health officials said they had agreed to speed up disbursements to the health sector but did not offer

increases. President Mejia said he would consider strikers' demands for higher pay, provided they helped lobby Congress for the increase. A GODR medical official told us the Mejia administration has already taken measures to improve equipment and working conditions at the hospitals. Private hospitals and clinics used by Embassy personnel were not affected by the strike.

COMMENT

10. (SBU) So far, the echoing silence of the work stoppage has provided everyone evidence of a national consensus that Dominicans are unhappy with economic conditions, inflation, and electricity blackouts. The absence of organized protests today contrasts eerily with Monday's well-attended PLD cavalcade on the Duarte Day national holiday and with Tuesday night's midnight parades across town by fans celebrating the championship of Santo Domingo baseball team Licey. We expect that the political campaigns will channel Dominican energies over the months between now and the May 16 first round vote.  
HERTELL